DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 198 470 CG 015 059

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TITLE Enhancing the Well-Being of the Marginal Elderly Through Art Appreciation.
PUB DATE Nov 80
NOTE 16p.: Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (33rd, San Diego, CA, November 21-25, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education: *Adult Programs: *Art Activities: Art Expression: *Enrichment Activities: Individual Development: *Lifelong Learning: *Older Adults: *Painting (Visual Arts): Program Descriptions: Program Evaluation: Recreational Activities: Self Esteem: Self Expression

ABSTRACT

This article describes a 10-week experimental class in painting for older adults at a Jewish Community Service Center. The rationale for offering a painting course is presented and the community center facilities are described in detail. The demographics of the 19 relatively isolated, shy persons aged 65-84 who met for 2-hour weekly sessions are provided. The objective of the class, i.e., to provide students with a personally and socially enriching experience through painting, is discussed as well as the instructional methods of lectures, group discussions, individual instruction, model presentation, art gallery visits, feedback, and the session formats. Changes in student behavior and achievement of class objectives are reviewed. An evaluation of the class is followed by a discussion of plans for the future. (NRB)

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Enhancing the Well-Being of the Marginal Elderly through Art Appreciation

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November, 1980

CG 015059

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During the past quarter century there has been a phenomenal development of programs and services to meet the needs of increasing numbers of older people in all the populations of the world. The services have ranged from those that are social in nature i.e., those that are designed to meet a social need to those that are personally enriching and self fulfilling. The recognition that the welfare of the total community is dependent on the well-being of all its citizens including the elderly, is essential.

The needs of older people have for too long been given low priority. Ignoring the range of needs they present is no longer sound policy in a nation whose population over sixty-five years of age will have increased from 4.1% (3 million) in 1900 to a projected 32 million by 2000. These 32 million will be 12.2% of the total population of about 260 million (Facts About Older Americans, 1978). The increased visibility of the aged has generated increased public concern with their needs, and government at all levels, voluntary planning groups, and individuals have recognized their responsibility to take some action (Vickery, 1972, pp. 20-21). This trend is noted in the creation of many novel and creative programs, services, and activities in public and private agencies.

Many activities that have been developed with and for older people are especially significant because of the benefits that accrue for the participant. For instance, some classes such as woodwork, metallurgy, sculpting, etc. are especially pertinent because they provide environments in which members may experience acceptance by others, feelings of belonging to a group, and recognition as individuals of worth. Such feelings strengthen the older person's self-image and help him feel good about himself. Despite the fact that while underservice and "benign neglect" often characterize our treatment of the needy elderly, there are

some service programs that actually enhance their functional effectiveness through self-development and personal enrichment.

The purpose of this paper is to present an in-depth discussion of a successful ten week experimental class in painting led by a certified paid painting instructor for community-based marginal elderly to a Jewish Community Service Center. Painting was chosen for several reasons: (1) it was a novel activity - something challenging and sophisticated that would stimulate their learning abilities; (2) it would stimulate high levels of interaction among the older participants; (3) it was unique and different from some other arts activities - something most older persons do not do away from home; (4) it is a personal and creative skill, the finished product of which would bring higher levels of self-satisfaction; and (5) a finished painting would bring about feelings of contentment, evidence of success, a stimulus of reinforcement, and positive feedback from other people.

The decision to offer this course was based on the center's belief that a range of courses is needed to benefit a range of older persons. And it was felt that there were socially isolated older people of lowered social status and self-esteem who could benefit from an activity that had personal appeal for them. In fact when interviewed, three sets of informants: the elderly themselves; their family and friends; and agency representatives expressed the need for an enrichment class in painting.

The Setting

The class was originally conducted for a brief period of time in two other settings i.e., the stage of an auditorium, and the hallway of a synagogue before moving to a classroom in the Jewish Community Center.

Although the participants were moved to three different locations, this did not seem to disrupt their learning nor interfere with their desire to continue with the class. However, it is the last site, the Jewish Community Center where most of the learning experiences took place that will be described in this paper.

The Jewish Community Center is located in a predominantly Jewish and urban area of Pittsburgh, Pa. It is surrounded by large, stately and attractive residential homes and in walking distance of stores, libraries, cafeterias, hospitals and major transportation.

The center is a one story building with staff offices, classrooms, and a large multi-purpose room used for senior adult luncheons. The building is clean and well-kept. There is a parking lot in the rear of the building. All of the rooms have bright lighting.

The center, like many other multi-purpose centers, offers a range of activities for groups of all ages. For example, consider the following:

I. Early Childhood -

- A. Physical Education
- B. Music Instruction
- C. Special Interest classes

II. Children - Ages - Kindergarden - 5th Grade

- A. Physical Education
- B. Drama
- C. Photography
- D. Ceramics
- E. Special Interest Clinics and Worksnops

III. Family

A. Holiday Dinners

B. Family Physical Education

C. Family Weekends

IV. Youth - 6th-12th Grades

A. Dance

B. Theatre

C. Physical Education

D. Interest Clubs

E. Volunteer Programs

F. Career Guidance Programs

G. Sign Language

V. Adults

A. Single Parent Clubs

B. Gourmet Cooking

C. Single Meetings

D. Physical Education

E. Art Classes

VI. Senior Adults

A. Bridge

B. Physical Fitness

C. Couples Club

D. Dance Classes

E. Art

F. Book Reviews

G. New Americans (Classes for New Immigrants)

H. Special Interest Groups

I. Lunches

J. Crafts

K. Swimming

VII. Complete Music School

A. Dance (Ballet - Modern Dance - Jazz)

B. Instrument Lessons

VIII. Community Center has expanded facilities to the suburbs of Pittsburgh.

The class was held in an attractive, spacious, and well-lighted room. The room was large enough to give students ample room for working without feeling crowded. And yet, the informal educational approach gave the older class members an opportunity to come to know one another intimately.

The atmosphere was quiet and private and influenced by a density of age peers. There was easy access to the room and storage space for placing unfinished work as well as space for placing personal articles such as handbags, coats, hats, and so forth. The room gave students the feeling that they were in an art studio.

The Older Students

The initial class consisted of 19 (2 males and 17 females) relatively isolated and shy older members (aged 65-84) who met for 2-hour weekly sessions. The average attendance for the class was between 10 to 12 persons.

All of the older participants were of limited educational backgrounds (ranging from no formal education to high school education), living on fixed or limited incomes, and relatively culturally and socially

disadvantaged. Several of them were immigrants, and all older participants when interviewed indicated that they had never painted before. While most of the class members were in reasonably good health (i.e., they were ambulatory), some had arthritis in various joints and they had to sit and paint. This placed a limit on the extent of their level of active participation in the class.

The members of the class were nonsectarian and resided in the community in which the class was held. All older persons either lived in their own homes or apartments or with a relative.

The Painting Instructor

The class was taught by a well-trained certified painting instructor. She has taught painting in various local community colleges in Western Pennsylvania. Her experience in teaching at this level was helpful in developing and teaching a course in painting to older adults.

Painting was viewed as a personal art; a sophisticated activity, and one that could stimulate a broad level of skill and creativity. She was interested in helping the older class members feel a sense of accomplishment in what they made rather than being concerned with the perfection or even the beauty of the finished product. The instructor instilled the idea that there was "no right way or wrong way -- only your way. There are different styles of painting."

This attitude fostered more creativity and openness among the class members and enabled the goals to remain flexible throughout. Each student was encouraged to attain his own potential.

The Class Objective

The major goal of the class was to provide the older students with a personally and socially enriching experience through painting. Additionally, it was hoped that such a course would be culturally and educationally stimulating, and would further enhance the physical, mental, and social well-being of the older class member.

The specific objectives of the class were: (1) to increase communication with peers, family, and friends; (2) to increase socialization and interaction with peers; (3) to increase opportunities for social interaction and (personal) self-fulfillment; (4) to increase feelings of self-worth; (5) to establish personal bonds among group members; and (6) to develop basic painting skills.

Methods of Instruction

The specific objectives of the course were achieved through a variety of procedures that included: brief lectures, discussion among the class members, individual instruction through guide help from the instructor, model presentation by the painting instructor in terms of lighting, design, and color, slides and audio visual aids, visit to the art gallery, and feedback of painting from fellow class members.

At the end of the class all paintings were lined up on easels, and the members of the class critiqued each piece separately. The class instructor generally initiated the procedure and using herself as a role model the members of the class were encouraged to try their skills at critiquing. Emphasis was on providing positive feedback. This procedure of critiquing helped to involve all the individuals and they soon began to act as a group. They eventually found that they could help each other with suggestions on their paintings.

Format of Weekly Sessions

The initial class consisted of 19 elderly members who met for ten 2-hour weekly sessions. (Average attendance throughout the class was between 10 to 12 persons.) Each meeting opened with a 10 minute discussion to introduce the topic for that session. The topic and exercise generally varied on a weekly basis, but consistently related to some aspect of skill development in painting. Skill exercises were somewhat graduated in order of difficulty and complexity over the course of the ten week period.

The ten weekly sessions are briefly outlined below:

1. During the first session, the instructor gave a general introduction to painting and the class members examined visually and by touching the basic materials to be used throughout the class. Such materials included paper, brushes, paints, plastic spoons, paper plates, plastic containers, canvas board spatulas for mixing, etc. The lesson focused on form, shape, shadow and color. The students examined a still life of fruit - apple (for a circle), Pear (triangle), box (square). The instructor used a lamp to create shadow and highlight. The students also became familiar with the paints.

2. To familiarize the students with the materials early in the class, a simplistic activity was planned for sessions two and three. Each student was shown how to make easels out of cardboard boxes. The student, on completing his still life work on canvas board, was then asked to find a picture or subject he/she would like to paint.

3. A trip to a local museum was planned for session four. This was done to acquaint the senior adult with what type of work was being done in contemporary times. Most of the individuals were aware of masterpiece paintings but none knew or understood contemporary art.

During the first part (session five) of this activity, most people who painted stayed to themselves and concentrated only on their own painting. Peer interaction was low during the fifth session, though interaction with the painting instructor was high. The instructor used this session to give individual instruction to the class members i.e., color, etc. as well as positive feedback, and to encourage the non-participants to become more actively involved.

This exercise was carried over for a sixth session. By that time, more students began to paint, the level of interaction among peers had increased, and the class began to come alive.

5. For session seven, the class members were instructed to bring in a picture they wanted to paint. Most brought pictures from Modern Maturity. A new dimension was added to that exercise, i.e., the critiquing of each others paintings and eventually their own. The instructor initiated the process by carefully examining each painting for light, color, highlight, depth, spacial qualities, shadows, etc. and offered positive comments about the perspective of each painting. Suggestions were made to highlight a feature here or there, to add more color or tone to an object and so forth.

At first, some of the class members were a bit shy to take criticism and rather reluctant to give it. However, once they became more comfortable about the purpose of the criticism their attitude changed. Class members became actively involved at this point. Some new entrants to the class wanted to join. However, their presence was resented by the original class members who felt their progress would be held back.

This class exercise continued for sessions eight and nine. By now, the class members were coming to the class in carpools with each other, while a few were walking or being driven to class by the instructor.

A decision was made during session eight to have a painting exhibit at which time the class members would put on display whatever they had painted during the class.

6. For session ten, a more difficult and complex activity was introduced. The class was shown how to put canvas together and also shown how to pull them.

Three pieces of art were done throughout the ten sessions - the first still life painting took approximately three weeks to complete; the second painting, three weeks and the third activity - pulling canvas and priming - a total of four weeks.

At the end of the ten sessions the instructor was approached to display the senior adult work. All pictures painted were collected and taken to the center.

Changes in Student Behavior

Since there was only one instructor in the class, and the class had started on an experimental basis, the instructor found it difficult to know what first needed to be observed. She wanted to become as familiar as possible with the participants. This she tried to do through individual interaction. In addition, she wanted to create a friendly, relaxed, and enjoyable atmosphere -- one that would enhance interaction and communication.

She began to observe who communicated with whom and how frequently; the nature and quality of the interaction, i.e., who shared art tools, space, etc. with whom and who volunteered verbal suggestions to whom; who shared ideas with each other; what information outside of painting was shared with whom; and whose family member(s) or friends called to share remarks about what they heard about the class.

She also observed facial expressions and noted any signs of boredom, frustration, easing of tensions, and so forth.

Initially, the older students appeared shy, reluctant to get involved, and uncertain about their ability to develop any skills in painting. At this point, peer interaction was at a low level as most of the students stayed to themselves. Although class attendance was generally good throughout the ten week period, the reasons given for not attending the class related to some activity that had to be done with a family member or friend. For instance, a class member might call to say he could not attend class that day because, "I have a luncheon date with a friend," or "I've decided to visit my daughter and grandchildren today." No one ever called to say they would not be able to attend the class again.

Midway the semester several of the students began to arrive at least an hour before the class was scheduled to start. Rather than keeping the students waiting (and since the room was available), the instructor decided to maintain flexible hours and start class when the earliest students arrived. By the fifth week of class, the students had gained more familiarity with the materials, the painting instructor, what was expected of them and with each other. They experienced no pressure to paint an aesthetic masterpiece, received positive feedback for their efforts from both the instructor and their peers, and began to identify with their finished products.

Achievement of Class Objectives

A creative activity such as this will have different meanings for different members. For most, it will provide opportunities for personal enjoyment and enrichment. For others facing crisis and loneliness, the

program's value will be the emotional support it gives.

The varied painting exercises, the flexibility of the structure of the class, the sensitivity of the instructor to the needs of the older participants, the positive regard the instructor demonstrated toward both the older students and their efforts, and the feelings of concern and goodwill that existed among the class members all contributed toward the achievement of the class objectives.

The class in painting also had a few serendipitous effects. Some older people with serious physical handicaps wanted to join the class. For instance, a stroke victim who only painted numbers decided he wanted something more. A woman who painted with dark glasses due to an eye problem, senior adults who had trouble standing, sitting and painting, and a woman who just lost her husband, and so forth.

Older people enter into a learning situation only if it appears to have immediate value and interest and holds little potential for failure. The sense of mastery that comes with the completion of one's first painting is an experience that adds zest to the day and can bolster feelings of accomplishment and adequacy.

Evaluation of the Class

A conscious decision was made at the beginning of the class to avoid giving grades. The reason for this decision was to minimize the amount of stress that is frequently associated with evaluation ("tests"). The instructor had hoped to provide a noncompetitive environment in which none of the members would feel embarrassed, threatened, or inadequate or made to appear foolish.

During one of the final sessions of the class, the members decided to have an art show. It was hoped that every class member would volunteer

to enter one or more of his paintings. Every student did. For this each participant received a Certificate of Placement which meant only that their painting had been placed in the show.

Family and friends were invited. No prizes were awarded and everything was done on an equal basis.

Plans for the Future

A conscious goal of a teacher or instructor is to enable the student to move from one kind of activity and develop interest in a new one. Only then can the older person, for example, experience the satisfaction that comes through creative growth and development of his interests and skills. Future plans include sequencing. That is, the instructor plans to build an art program from the most basic painting skills to the most complex. The instructor intuitively sensed a desire on the part of the elderly students to learn more, and this was corroborated by their request to try something else the next time the class convened.

The painting class such as the one described here was extremely beneficial for these older students because it required little gross mobility and only slight physical exertion. No doubt many of the movements helped to keep fingers and arms flexible and joints limber.

Although each member of the class indicated at the start of the class that he had never painted before, he had little difficulty learning a variety of painting skills in this informal and noncompetitive environment. Contrary to stereotypes of intellectual stagnation and decline in old age, the students demonstrated that creativity and personal growth can continue into advanced old age. They also demonstrated that older people learn best, when the pace is not too fast and the materials or tasks are meaningful to them (Botwinick, 1973) and when a feeling of security is given.

Beyond that, the painting activity was not seen as an end in and of itself, but as an opportunity for interpersonal relationships among members that would produce feelings of self-worth and personal and social enrichment.

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